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## **Speculative Literature in Modern Society: Octavia Butler and the Tragedy of the Commons**

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**Speculative Literature in Modern Society: Octavia Butler and the Tragedy of the  
Commons**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of English

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Katherine Elyse Miller

13 December 2017

## **Introduction**

What leads to peaceful prosperity and what leads to destructive collapse in any society? While it may seem daunting or overwhelming to dissect the success or collapse of a multi-faceted society, there are lenses and tools through which we are able to do so, such as political theory and speculative dystopian fiction. By using lenses to analyze the society in which we live, we are able to recognize the seeds of both prosperity and destruction in our society that may otherwise be overlooked or ignored. The speculative dystopian fiction of Octavia Butler may be considered as building upon the political theory of the tragedy of the commons. Butler provides her American audience an analysis of the root causes of this tragedy, as well as some possible preventative measures or solutions. We read her novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, as a warning against ignoring current trends in our society which could lead to our tragedy of the commons.

Octavia Butler was an American author of speculative dystopian fiction, and was the first science fiction novelist to be awarded the MacArthur Fellowship in 1955. She was born in California on June 22, 1947 and died in Washington on January 24, 2006. Butler was well-known for critiquing social hierarchies and inequalities as well as for exploring what forms healthy, sustainable communities. Her first novel in her Parable Series, *The Parable of the Sower*, introduces Butler's reader to a broken community in a divided society after an environmental apocalypse. Through her protagonist, Lauren Olamina, Butler shows her reader the flaws and failures in society that lead to the community's collapse as well as how a community can be rebuilt.

## **The Tragedy of the Commons**

The political theory of the tragedy of the commons is one lens through which we can understand the seeds being planted in our society. A commons is a shared resource from which everyone takes or pulls, but for which no one takes sole ownership or responsibility. An example of this is the environment. Everyone shares the oceans and skies, but few if any, take personal responsibility for its survival. Many people contribute to the pollution of the shared resource, leading to a tragedy of the commons. The tragedy of the commons can be defined as the imbalance between the greater good and self-interest which causes resources to dwindle or be destroyed. This tragedy can be applied to a multitude of disciplines and was made notable by ecologist and philosopher Garrett Hardin in his 1968 article “The Tragedy of the Commons,” which has been re-interpreted and debated for decades by scholars who vary in opinion on how the tragedy can be avoided or solved. This political theory can be applied to the society created in Octavia Butler’s novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, as she explores a world in which, to the detriment of its citizens, the commons has gone unchecked.

In his 1968 essay, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Garrett Hardin focused on the population problem. The population problem exists because as humans, we live in a finite world with limited resources, but our population is growing at an ever increasing rate because humans are free to reproduce; however, the Earth has a limited carrying capacity that, if current trends continue, will one day be reached. He continues to the “tragedy of freedom in the commons” and depicts this tragedy with an illustration of herdsmen and a shared field. In the illustration, a resource is shared by many but none take individual responsibility for its survival (Hardin 1244). “Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited” (Hardin

1244). An unregulated commons that has no limiting factor to ensure the good of the community is put above the good of the individual.

Hardin discusses both the destruction and possible reconstruction of the commons in his essay. While his focus is on the population problem, he treats this problem as a member of a larger genre of problems. He sorts the population problem into the “problems with no technical solution class” (Hardin 1243). Hardin defines technical solutions as those which “require a change only in the techniques of the natural sciences, demanding little or nothing in the way of changes in the human values or ideas of morality” (Hardin 1243). The difficulty in solving such problems is that they surround ideas and definitions of ‘good;’ however each person has a different definition of what ‘good’ means or how it should be maximized per person. It is then, therefore, an incommensurable which many believe cannot be logically solved or regulated. Hardin combats this by pointing out, “in real life incommensurables are commensurable. Only in a criterion of judgement and a system of weighting are needed” (Hardin 1244). He describes natural selection as the system of weighting in nature and claims we need something that mimics the same effect in the human population. The first step of which is to evict the idea of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ from society. Society is not self-regulating and needs to be governed by laws and policies.

Hardin describes the ways in which the tragedy of the commons can be seen in our society through several examples of the exploitation of natural resources. The population problem is an abuse of the commons by increasing the demand for an already limited or finite resource. The pollution of the oceans is another example of the commons’ abuse. “Maritime nations still respond automatically to the shibboleth of the

‘freedom of the seas.’ Professing to believe in the ‘inexhaustible resources of the oceans,’ they bring species after species of fish and whales closer to extinction” (Hardin 1245).

Another example is the erosion of National Parks due to the number of visitors. In all of the cases, the people who share a public commons have failed to take ownership or responsibility for its survival because they are not regulating their own self-interest.

Hardin focuses on large-scale solutions to the tragedy of the commons through the regulation of resources, restricted access, and reformed legislation. Regulation of resources and restricted access to the commons impedes some personal freedoms. He acknowledges that his proposed “reasonable possibilities...are all objectionable,” but he believes they are necessary to combat the destruction of the commons (Hardin 1245). He describes a system of mutual coercion made of “social arrangements that produce responsibility” (Hardin 1247). He points out that society’s decision to forego some personal freedoms for the greater good can be seen in accepted policies such as paying taxes. “Who enjoys taxes? We all grumble about them. But we accept compulsory taxes because we recognize that voluntary taxes would favor the conscienceless” (Hardin 1247). We subscribe to these mutually coercive policies and legislations because we recognize that ignoring them would lead us to a broken commons. Hardin also recognizes that legislation is difficult to form and properly implement due to system-sensitive morality and the self-interest of legislators. He recognizes that legislators and leaders are susceptible to corruption and therefore require a system with checks and balances. He says, “the great challenge facing us now is to invent the corrective feedbacks needed” to keep officials honest and legitimize their authority (Hardin 1245).

Hardin suggests that social constructions and policies created through mutual coercion are the most effective ways to combat the commons. Large scale-problems require large scale solutions or “social arrangements that produce responsibility” (Hardin 1247). While the society in Octavia Butler’s novel, *The Parable of the Sower* suffers a breakdown of the commons due to large scale factors such as those described by Hardin, she proposes a different approach to rectifying the tragedy. Hardin’s analysis ignores the local implications of the large scale forces that perpetuate the tragedy of the commons. Butler depicts a world in which the large scale forces have trickled down to create small scale seeds of destruction in communities that need to be reversed from the local level upwards rather than from the top down.

#### Speculative Dystopian Fiction

Speculative fiction is a genre of literature that explores worlds that are different from the real world in a specific or purposeful way. The sequence of events presented in speculative fiction is often like events possible in the real world, but fantastic enough to seem equally impossible. “The key emphasis in this definition is on speculative representation of what would happen had the actual chain of causes or the matrix of reality- conditions been replaced with other conditions” (Gill 73). This genre of literature allows the reader room to interpret a text and apply it to reality. Speculative fiction is sometimes considered a sub-genre of science fiction; however, other scholars consider science fiction to be a sub-genre of speculative fiction.

Within speculative fiction is dystopian speculative fiction, which brings its readers to a society in which things have gone terribly wrong. “Dystopias usually exaggerate contemporary social trends and in doing so, offer serious social criticism”



(Burnett et al 77). It allows us to see the seeds of destruction in our own society from an outside or more removed perspective. While the depicted failed societies can seem hopeless, they represent hope in our own society. Recognizing a similarity between a dystopian society in a novel and our own society provides us the opportunity to change the direction in which society is going.

A purpose of dystopian speculative fiction is to force the readers to think about their choices and the impact they have on their community. To identify a seed of destruction—a breakdown of the commons—within our own society which is identified in a speculative dystopian novel is to respond to the presented problem before it leads to society's collapse. It is an opportunity to shift the direction in which society is moving to prevent its downfall. In this way, speculative dystopian fiction is an excellent tool through which modern society can be analyzed.

*The Speculative Dystopian Fiction of Octavia Butler*

Octavia Butler's dystopian speculative novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, is an esteemed work of science fiction that has been acclaimed for its relevance to American society from its publication in 1993 through today. In 1994, *The Parable of the Sower* was nominated for the Nebula Award for Best Novel and the Locust Award for Best Science Fiction novel in 1995. The novel has been examined as a work which provokes reflection and understanding of social and political concerns such as change and community.

Butler's speculative fiction novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, mulls over a future which could be produced by our society's current mistakes. The world she creates is suffering from an environmental apocalypse that has turned water into a commodity and

forced inhabitants to turn to new forms of agriculture, such as using acorns to produce bread, for survival. Butler's protagonist, Lauren lives in this fallen world inside of a walled community. Her community has suffered the effects of society's collapse and turns to religious doctrine and isolation for survival. Lauren's community serves as a microcosm of the breakdown the world faces.

Octavia Butler uses Lauren's thoughts, observations, and actions to show her reader flaws in the infrastructure of society and the lasting consequences these flaws can produce. Nilges writes, "Butler is often lauded for her extraordinary ability to grasp the social complexities of the present and envision necessary political and social solutions in her narratives of the future" (Nilges 1334). He continues on to describe the ways in which Butler explores concepts of change within a society, not only in its necessity, but in its inevitability. "Change is neither associated with Utopian imagination, nor is it as the future. Instead, change is an aspect of pragmatic realism and a central characteristic of the present" (Nilges 1337). Nilges equates the main character's proposed religion, Earthseed, as a suggestion for ameliorating our current socioeconomic failures. Lauren "realizes that the present problem is that embracing change is necessary in order to formulate an individual and collective existence that corresponds to the world surrounding them" (Nilges 1337). Change is not then something that entered society unexpectedly, but something that society cannot avoid.

The author uses Lauren to depict the creation of a community that arises from and responds to her previous community's failures which mirror failures in modern American society. She constructs an "explicit allusion to contemporary neoliberal economic policy, which promotes the demands of capital over the needs of labor" which reveals "Butler's

understanding of modern dystopia: the reduction of community to market economy” (Phillips 304). This allusion links societal collapse and the breakdown of community with a radical capitalism that infiltrates and disrupts everyday life in the novel, demonstrating the dangers of an unchecked capitalist society.

I will take the analysis of the scholars one step further by applying it to the political theory of the tragedy of the commons. Neither scholar discusses Hardin’s theory in his analysis, and I feel the tragedy of the commons provides another dimension of understanding to the large-scale breakdown of community in Octavia Butler’s novel. The two scholars also focus on Lauren’s community as a microcosm of the larger issues present in society. I would like to instead show how the large-scale issues in society presented in the novel coincide with the breakdown of the commons presented by Garrett Hardin, and go on to describe the small-scale effects of the tragedy of the commons presented by Butler. Hardin’s theory is centered around large-scale forces and infrastructure while Butler demonstrates the local impacts of a broken commons and provides her reader a method of repairing the commons from the grass roots level.

### **Analysis**

#### ***The Destruction of the Commons***

In Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower* the reader sees a society whose commons has been destroyed by large-scale forces such as an alternative-right wing President controlling an inadequate, neoliberal economy, a capitalist civilization which fails to maximize the ‘good’ of all citizens, and a national ideology that is built upon a rigid, outdated set of values. The large-scale failure of the commons coincides with the theory proposed by Hardin about what makes an unsuccessful or successful commons.

Butler takes their theory a step further in her novel by showing how these large-scale elements lead to small-scale community effects such as isolation and willful ignorance.

Butler introduces her readers into a society that suffers from large-scale flaws resulting in a failed commons. The first overarching flaw in the novel is the inadequate neoliberal economy controlled by a destructive President. Lauren describes the new President of the United States as a leader from the alternative-right, who believes in the preservation of the past and the privatization of government programs. She refers to President Donner as a “kind of human bannister” and explains that he is “like a symbol of the past for us to hold onto as we are pushed into the future. He's nothing. No substance. But having him there...makes people feel that the country, the culture that they grew up with is still there” (Butler 56). Destructive leadership allows new seeds of societal collapse to be planted in the population and allows existing seeds to grow rather than combatting them with seeds of success. President Donner's neoliberal policies and government infrastructure only furthers the pre-existing problems that plague Lauren's society.

President Donner represents what citizens find familiar and comfortable. He is someone who promises the ‘quick-fix’ and short-term solutions to everyday concerns. President Donner epitomizes Adam Smith's theory of the invisible hand. He works to provide space for the market to find its equilibrium with supply and demand. Lauren writes that he promises to put “people back to work. He hopes to get laws changed, suspend ‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers wishing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board” (Butler 27). This proposed change is a neoliberal

economic policy that focuses on the short-term fix rather than long-term implications. President Donner's promises sound like a convenient solution that brings hope to people who have been marginalized and a quick amelioration to their complaints; however, complex problems are rarely, if ever, solved by simple solutions. Hardin points this out to his reader when describing the difficulty in solving problems which include the interest of diverse stakeholders. While Hardin refers to the population problem when he writes, "reaching an acceptable and stable solution will surely require more than one generation of hard analytical work—and much persuasion," this rings true for any multi-faceted problem perpetuated by the ingrained infrastructure of society (Hardin 1244). It rings true for Donner's policies.

Lauren notes that the language used by President Donner to describe his plan is vague and leaves room for later interpretation and exploitation of the new laws. The lowering of worker protection laws allows employers to exploit already vulnerable populations such as the homeless. By referring to the previous laws as "overly restrictive" President Donner implies his reforms would allow more individual autonomy in society. This rhetoric is in line with the invisible hand theory popularized by Adam Smith which claims someone "who 'intends only his own gain,' is, as it were, 'led by an invisible hand to promote...the public interest'" (Hardin 1244). The invisible hand theory is rejected by Hardin when he writes, "ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing their own best interest in a society that believes in freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all" (Hardin 1244). The policies created by President Donner to extend personal freedoms and allow individual corporations or citizens to pursue their own gains at the expense of others allows at risk populations to be

marginalized and exploited. By privatizing public services, the government essentially decides who is worth saving and who does not deserve justice based on socioeconomic class.

Staying in line with Hardin's theory, Butler uses the exploitation of workers under neoliberal economic policies in a radical capitalist society to demonstrate the dangers of privatization. Public services that a modern reader would expect to be accessible to all people in need of them have been privatized in the novel. The Fire Department and Police Department have been turned into entities that work for profit and whose services are often too expensive to utilize. When a house in Lauren's neighborhood is set on fire, they cannot avoid calling the Fire Department to contain and extinguish the fire. The "firefighters arrived in no great hurry" and put out the fire (Butler 145). They have no need to rush, because they will be paid to put out the fire regardless of when they arrive, and there are no competing organizations, therefore there is no incentive to provide high-quality services.

President Donner's neoliberal economic policies only further the economic division in society by allowing the rich to profit from the dependence of the poor. By revoking "overly restrictive" labor laws, the standard of living for workers plummets. Companies are responsible for paying wages; however, the wages can be paid in company credit. Employees still have to pay for work clothing, food, and rental costs, but they can only use their company credit in the company store which is too expensive to cover all of the necessary living expenses. Wages were never quite enough, forcing employees to borrow money from their employers and go into debt. The new laws mean, "people were not permitted to leave an employer to whom they owed money" (Butler

288). The workers then become indentured servants that represent a new kind of legalized slavery in society. Failing to pay off one's debt leaves people liable to be arrested, and children are left to work off the debts of their parents if their parents can no longer work. The workers who are trapped under their debt can be further exploited by their employer. They

could be forced to work longer hours for less pay, could be 'disciplined' if they failed to meet their quotas, could be traded and sold with or without their consent, with or without their families, to distant employers who had temporary or permanent need of them (288).

With this description of the workers' fates, Butler equates radical capitalism to a modern form of slavery.

President Donner represents the unchecked politician who is able to thrive in a failed system of governance. Citizens have become discouraged with this failed system, which discourages them from participating in political elections. During the election, Lauren writes, "Dad decide not to vote for Donner after all. He didn't vote for anyone. He said politicians turned his stomach" (Butler 26). While Lauren does not recount the previous political failures which led to her father's distaste for politicians, the reader can conclude that the neoliberal economy allows for corruption or the pursuit of personal gain by its leaders. Checks and balances are needed to ensure no single leader or idea dominates the entire system. An infrastructure that allows for imperfect people to govern society unchecked allows corruption to breed within it, and it allows destructive leaders to prosper at the expense of others. In the case of Butler's novel, it allows a destructive leader to strengthen a radical capitalism that fosters inequality in society.

Neoliberal policies have left local communities suffering the effects of climate change, and dwindling resources, such as water, have become commodities due to the deregulation of the commons. Lauren and her fellow travelers must ration their water supply as they travel along the highways and roads. Lauren depicts the infrastructure of water stations by explaining, “commercial stations let you draw whatever you pay for—and not a drop more—right out of one of their taps. You drink whatever the local householders are drinking. It might taste, smell, or look bad, but you can depend on it not to kill you (Butler 201). The water stations represent a radical capitalism under the American ideology in which access to resources necessary to live is dependent on socioeconomic class.

The society in the novel is restricted by its rigidity. It is rooted in the past rather than adapting to the present or planning for the future. The laws “follow the pattern of ancient ethics, and therefore are poorly suited to governing a complex, crowded, changeable world” (Hardin 1245). Lauren acknowledges that President Donner was elected due to his appeal to what is nostalgic or familiar to her parent's generation. By electing a leader who does not reform current policies to adapt to new developments in society, the rigid, outdated system is able to continue. Rigidity and traditionalism can lead to societal disintegration that crosses from large-scale policies and breakdowns to small-scale community effects. Lauren discusses the community's inability to change and adapt when discussing the current political climate with a friend following the presidential election. Lauren says, “things are changing now, too. Our adults haven't been wiped out by a plague so they're still anchored in the past, waiting for the good old days to come back” (Butler 57). By holding themselves in the past, the adults are unable to



adapt and change to current needs in society. Instead, the adults remain rigid in their beliefs. Lauren links the adults' rigidity to their need to hold on to traditional religion which is painted as out-of-date in the novel.

Butler uses traditional religion in the novel to demonstrate the ways in which it can be a destructive or constructive force in society. Butler demonstrates the dangers of dogmatic, authoritarian religion when it is used as an excuse to ignore the needs of others and the changes in society. Religion is not inherently a destructive force; it becomes a destructive force in Lauren's community when it is used to control and limit thinking because of deference to church leaders such as Lauren's father. There is no motivation to adapt or change. The religion in Lauren's neighborhood, led by her father, prevents its members from moving forward as they believe "in a literal acceptance of everything in the Bible" (Butler 23). The community's interpretation of the Bible does not help them adapt as society changes. By taking the Bible literally rather than using it as a guide for understanding the world around them, as an example of how to extend community to the people who have been ostracized, the community uses religion as an excuse to focus on themselves rather than focusing on others; religion in this way works hand in hand with neoliberalism. Lauren's community is willing to leave the safety of the community to have a baptism in "big tub of expensive water" (Butler 16). Lauren points out that it would be less expensive and less dangerous to be baptized at home in a bath tub, but no one pays attention to her idea. She writes, "to adults, going outside to a real church is like stepping back into the good old days when there were churches all over the place and too many lights and gasoline for fueling cars and trucks instead of for torching things" (Butler 8). Religion is one thing that the community members seem to feel they can

control or keep alive from the “good old days,” but Lauren feels even this is out of date and should be rethought.

In addition to the crossover of rigidity and traditionalism in large-scale and small-scale levels of analysis, the large-scale causes of the breakdown in society continue further into the small-scale effects visible in communities, such as Lauren’s neighborhood. These effects include the widespread presence of division and denial in the communities. Isolation and willful ignorance only add to the continuation of a failed commons as they affect inter-communal and inter-personal relationships and interactions.

Extreme division permeates the society in which Lauren lives through walls which act as barriers between one community and another. Lauren notes, “In this world, it is crazy to live without a wall to protect you” (Butler 10). Lauren describes this fragmentation of communities on the way to a baptism outside her neighborhood. She writes, “A lot of our ride was along one neighborhood wall after another...we passed a couple neighborhoods so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash” (Butler 9-10). The communities are separated by physical barriers which keeps each neighborhood isolated from the others.

The walls do not separate only the people who reside within each neighborhood. The walls also separate the people who can afford to live within the walls from the people who are less fortunate and must live outside of them. The people living outside of the walled communities represent the lower class. Desperation has struck the people shut out of the walled communities and driven them to extreme measures of living in which morals no longer exist, and every man or woman must focus only on his or her own survival. Life beyond the walled communities is dangerous and individuals living outside

of the protected communities are subject to horrors such as rape, thievery, murder, and pyromania. Lauren writes, “then there were the pitiful, unwalled residential areas. A lot of houses were trashed—burned, vandalized, infested with drunks or druggies, or squatted-in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children.” (Butler 10). Life outside of the walls gets burned first, but now the lower class are the ones doing the burning, spreading the destruction to the walled-in middle class. The unwalled residents are more or less left to their own destruction, divided from acceptable society.

Those living with walled communities represent the middle class who have been forced to divide themselves from the desperate, lower class for their own protection. The people living within the walled communities are afraid of those living outside of them. Ironically, it is thinking of one’s own survival instead of the survival of all which leads to the destruction of all. This line of thinking is demonstrated in the fear of outsiders. Xenophobia, fear of the ‘other,’ is a symptom of communal division that disconnects individuals living in the same society. The xenophobia present in the novel leads people to take desperate measures to ensure their own survival. Lauren and her friend, Joanne, discuss the fear of what will happen when the people outside of the walls break through them. Lauren is one of the few people who acknowledges the inevitability of this happening and tells Joanne they should prepare for the day the “hungry, desperate, crazy people outside decide to come in” (Butler 55). Eventually, the outside does come in and Lauren’s predictions of the community’s fate come true.

Many of the assailants were what Lauren describes as “pyro addicts—bald people with painted heads, faces, and hands. Red faces; blue faces; green faces; screaming mouths; avid, crazy eyes, glittering in the firelight” (Butler 153-154). Pyro is a drug that

incites pyromania in those who use it as a method of euphoria or escape from reality. It is a drug people turn to when they have lost all other hope. Donner's neoliberal employment policies encourage the continuation of income gaps by prioritizing inexpensive labor over the well-being of the laborers. The circumstances to which these people have been abandoned have driven them to both self-destruction and the destruction of others, a byproduct of the failed commons in the novel. By using fire, an uncontrollable, destructive element that does not discriminate in who it burns, Butler demonstrates how the community's isolation leads to its destruction. Communities that ostracize the people living outside of the walls either perish in the attack or are left to the same fate as the people without walls when their walls are destroyed. They become the 'other' they had previously ignored. In the attack on Lauren's community, the pyro addicts set fire to many of the buildings. This fire or burning is symbolic of any society that ignores the marginalized population.

Ignoring a problem only allows it to grow and become more difficult to reverse or solve. The denial in Lauren's community is another small-scale effect of the large-scale breakdown of the commons. Lauren's suburb is plagued by denial that prevents most of her family and friends from preparing for the inevitable tragedy of the commons in their community. Her community demonstrates Hardin's observation that even if we are aware reform is needed we "take no action at all, while we wait for a perfect proposal" remaining passive rather than becoming active (Hardin 1247). Lauren is cognizant that the walls keeping them inside and the others outside will one day be torn down, leaving them to their own devices. She is in the minority; most people are afraid to acknowledge the reality in which they are living. As Lauren studies survival skills, prepares an

emergency to-go pack, and tries to educate those close to her about the challenges they will soon face, she is ridiculed and punished for these efforts, and condemned for not conforming to the popular belief that the community would continue to be safe.

Lauren discusses her fears and predictions with her friend, Joanne who chooses to ignore their impending destruction and complain about Lauren's assertions to her mother. This disruption of social thought is presented to Lauren's father who invalidates her claims and her attempts to spread her insight to other members of their society. He tells her not to "warn Joanne or any of [her] other friends...Not now. I know you think you're right, but you're not doing anyone any good. You're just panicking people" (Butler 63). Her father invalidates her intelligence and awareness by saying, "'You're fifteen...You don't really understand what's going on here,'" even though he agrees with Lauren's observations to some extent (Butler 63). By ignoring the problems in their community and outside its borders, and by discouraging the education of others about such issues out of fear of their reaction, Lauren's father allows willful ignorance to grow. Lauren, who acknowledged the problem and prepared accordingly for its consequences, is one of the few members of the community to survive and helps other survivors going forward. Due to the community's denial, they are unprepared when their walls are invaded and face destruction. This willful ignorance is encouraged by the actions of the older, or parental, generation in the community who still long for a time that has past.

One night, Lauren woke to the neighborhood burning. She writes that, "everything was chaos. People running, screaming, shooting. The gate had been destroyed. Our attackers had driven an ancient truck though it" (Butler 153). The pyro addicts set fire to the neighborhood and attack its residence with guns. As she flees with

her survival kit and some clothing, Lauren watches as her neighbors perish due to the flames and gunfire. Lauren escapes, waiting until the chaos has ended to pick over the few belongings and items that survived the destruction along with other ravagers (Butler 159). The avoidance of those living outside the walls and ignoring the structural violence which keeps them as outsiders is destructive to everyone. Lauren's community isolates itself from the desperation outside of its borders, ignoring escalating problems such as increased number of break-ins and the burning of other communities. By casting the outsiders as insane or ravaged instead of asking what drove them to the point of becoming pyro addicts or living in an area in which they are subject to thievery, robbery, and rape, they willfully ignore concerns which affect everyone's survival. They perpetuate the collapse of a commons by looking only to their own interests rather than the interests of society.

Denial is also demonstrated by the response the older generation has to the environmental breakdown in the novel. While the reader does not know the exact cause of the environment's downfall, it is alluded to by a conversation Lauren has with Cory, her step mother, early in the novel. Cory discusses the city lights with Lauren, and that she would prefer having the lights again to being able to see the stars. This insinuates that individuals prioritized convenience or personal preference over the collective good, which links back to the failed societal infrastructure to incentivize prioritizing the good of all over the good of oneself. Cory's stance on the issue further supports the influence her generation has on the generation being raised, as she does not express regret over her decision, only that she cannot continue to make the decision in her current day. As an individual, Cory does not wish to change the community in which she lives or alter her

life to adapt to modern circumstances. She is passive because she has been forced to focus on her own individuals must choose to do something different if the domino effect of a failed commons is to be stopped.

*Responding to the Tragedy of the Commons*

Hardin responds to the tragedy of the commons in an unregulated, neoliberal society by saying we need to have mutual coercion to reduce the frequency at which we are breeding to solve the population problem. By saying we need a system of mutual coercion, he means that a sustainable community needs to decide to put the overarching good above individual self-interest or autonomy. While Butler's novel is not about breeding, I believe Hardin's theory and analysis still applies to the unregulated, neoliberal society she presents in the novel. Hardin's proposed solution of mutual coercion is good, but I believe Butler's outlined solution is better because she builds her outline on what has to come first before mutual coercion can be effective. Instead of controlling society through immediate legislation, it builds community based on a common set of values that makes citizens more compliant and willing to accept mutually coercive policies and practices. Lauren does not ignore the problems that are growing in her society. Instead, she actively combats them through education and the building of a new community based on ideals of change and adaptability rather than rigid, outdated ethics.

Octavia Butler provides her reader with a proposed solution to the tragedy of the commons which has plagued the society in her novel through the development of her main character, Lauren, and Lauren's pursuit of her new religion, Earthseed. Butler uses Lauren to show her readers the type of person who could rebuild the commons while inspiring others to do the same. Earthseed is the product of Lauren's disillusionment with

the world around her, as she notices the ways in which the division and denial stemming from the large-scale forces of destruction have broken her community.

The beginning of the new community occurs before the fire when Lauren prepares herself for survival and leadership. She reads books on survival tactics, acknowledging that the walls built around her community will eventually be inadequate safety barriers and that they must survive outside of them when that time comes. She writes about the importance of affective education as she writes down the verses of *Earthseed*. Lauren writes, “Intelligence is on going, individual adaptability...intelligence is demanding. If it is misdirected by accident or by intent, it can foster its own orgies of breeding and dying” (Butler 29). With this verse, Lauren makes an important distinction: education is only useful when it is the education needed in a community, when it is adapted to the needs of the people being educated. Lauren’s community is somewhat educated by the efforts of Cory and Lauren; however, it is not educated in subjects most important to their needs. It is not educated in methods of survival outside its walls. Lauren tries to spread the need to prepare for the future and learn as much about survival as one can to her friend Jo, but her attempts are rejected. Jo’s family wishes to ignore the need for such knowledge, to pretend a threat does not exist. It is this willful ignorance that leads to their downfall when the walls fall. Lauren is one of the few people who are able to survive the attack and go on to navigate life without walls.

Through Butler’s character Lauren’s emphasis on pertinent education, Butler pushes her readers to educate themselves on the potential downfalls of their own communities in order to combat them. Even if people choose to acknowledge a problem, if they do not have the tools or competency to oppose and reverse it, progress toward a



restored commons cannot be made. We must equip ourselves with the necessary skills and understanding to move forward and correct the divisions we incipiently allowed to be created. Butler takes this idea of combatting denial further by pointing out the dangers of ignoring growing problems in society and the needs of others. Lauren demonstrates the need to be aware and adapt to social circumstances in her approach to building community with other travelers who may otherwise be ostracized or left to fend for themselves.

Butler uses Lauren to express the need in society for individuals to be less self-centered and to be cognizant of the needs of others. Lauren is aware of the oppression people living outside the walled communities face and the reasons for their desperation. Rather than focusing on herself, thinking that self-reliance and passivity are methods of survival, she is cognizant enough to notice the division tearing society apart and counter it with thoughts of community. She writes, “People tend to give in to fear and depression, to need and greed, when no influence is strong enough to unify people, they divide, they struggle, one against one, group against group, for survival, position, and power” (Butler 103). Lauren’s selflessness combats this tendency. She is a selfless character, allowing herself to become vulnerable to help more at-risk individuals such as Justin Rohr, a young boy without a mother or a father and two sisters, Jill and Allie, who flee a life of prostitution and oppression imposed on them by their father (Butler 254, 237). All people who are willing to live by the values on which Lauren’s community bases itself upon are welcomed into the fold. Lauren does not discriminate based on race, gender, age, or past life events.

Butler wants her readers to see the value of embracing diversity as Lauren accepts

all types of people into her community. Lauren sees the necessity in uniting a divided society. She writes, “Embrace diversity. Unite—or be divided, robbed, ruled, killed by those who see you as prey. Embrace diversity or be destroyed” (Butler 196). On the road, Lauren chooses to align with a hispanic couple who has a small child, a family that would normally be seen as a weakness or a target on the road. Lauren consults her traveling companions before making the decision, then invites the couple to come and join her group as a safety precaution for their baby. When one of Lauren’s companions asks her why she would want them to join she responds, “they need us more than we need them” (Butler 207). She chooses to meet the needs of someone else rather than look out only for her own interest. A member of her fledgling community expresses fear of hitting bottom or following the trends of destruction, Lauren gives a message of hope when she says, “the group of us here doesn’t have to sink any lower” (Butler 328). She refuses to become complacent or be crippled by the problems they confront. Instead, she says “we’ve got work to do” and pursues an active role in correcting the mistakes of society (Butler 328).

Earthseed is religion that states, “God is change” (Butler 3). It acknowledges that humans are interconnected and constantly influencing one another. To create a sustainable community, change and adaptability must be a pillar on which it is built. Lauren writes, “all that you experience, all that is given to you or taken from you, all that you love or hate, need or fear will teach you—if you will learn. God is your first and your last teacher. God is your harshest teacher: subtle, demanding. Learn or die” (Butler 279). Lauren claims that God is change, and if God is the most subtle yet demanding creature, then the ability to change is the most needed ability in Lauren’s world. If society cannot

change and adapt, then society will perish. To reverse the breakdown of the commons, communities must be willing to change and grow with new circumstances and community advancements.

To survive and reverse the tragedy of the commons, Earthseed demonstrates that a community must mutually agree upon measures that allow all of the members to benefit and be a good citizen in society. Lauren says that the essential traits to being good citizens in an Earthseed community are “to shape to learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the fulfillment of the Destiny” which is “a unifying, purposeful life here on Earth” (Butler 261). Through Lauren’s words, Butler lays out a path to reverse the tragedy of the commons and begin rebuilding a sustainable from grass root efforts: adapt, educate, and unify.

Lauren’s pursuit of community to combat the seeds of division growing in society gives the reader a message of hope: it is not too late to start repairing a broken community. By acknowledging individuals who she encounters and showing them kindness, giving them the option to join her traveling group and eventual planted community, Lauren begins the healing of society through local, grassroots efforts. She starts to reverse the process of destruction that has infected society from the overarching infrastructures down to the individual citizens. As she reverses this process, Lauren focuses on creating a community that values change and adaptability suitable to the community’s needs.

*The Tragedy of the Commons in Our Society*

The tragedy of the commons depicted in Octavia Butler's novel mirrors a tragedy of the commons we are quickly approaching in the United States today. We have allowed destructive, large scale forces to go unchecked in society. The large-scale forces in society are trickling down into small-scale effects that promote division and denial in our communities. We have elected a right-wing leader whose neoliberal policies foster inequality and division in our capitalist society which is struggling to adapt and change with the needs of its population. President Donald Trump is similar to President Donner in that he promises the restoration of jobs and more choices in society with a goal of lifting supposedly restrictive policies in favor of neoliberal policies that allow the upper socioeconomic class to take advantage of the lower socioeconomic class. The rhetoric of his campaign was based in "protectionism, isolationism mingled with militaristic bluster, skepticism toward the environment and other regulation, antipathy toward immigrants and people of color generally, and vague pledges to restore declining domestic industries such as coal mining and manufacturing" (Lieberman et al. 7). President Trump fosters a culture of denial by ignoring consequences of climate change and encourages societal divisions with his marginalization of minorities in the United States.

President Trump's rise to power has inspired scholars to analyze his distinctive political ideology which has been referred to as Trumpism. This ideology promises "security, protection, stability, and hence a systematic deceleration of economic, occupational and cultural changes which are moving too fast and breed insecurity and anxiety for too many" (Pels). He rose to power much in the same way as Donner, through the exploitation of insecurities present in society, and validating the desire to ignore

changes in society. President Trump promises short term solutions to problems with long term consequences such as unemployment.

President Trump was elected by capitalizing on fear in the United States that has accompanied social and economic changes in society. A large portion of his voters were disaffected and disaffiliated white working-class and rural voters who feel increasingly alienated from the political and economic mainstream and who see themselves as losers in the reshuffling of economic success, social status, and political power that has unfolded in recent decades (Lieberman et al. 7).

His campaign targeted those who are afraid of change in society for fear that they will no longer have a set place without considerable adaptation or change. While no group of workers should be alienated or ignored in society, the promise to keep factory and mining jobs has far reaching, long-term consequences.

The loss of jobs in the working class with the rise of new economic practices is an issue that should not go ignored by society. “Working class whites have born the brunt of the economic changes that have revolutionized the U.S. economy in recent decades. The exodus of jobs in some traditional manufacturing industries has devastated communities;” however, promising to keep the jobs in spite of technological advancements is not a sustainable solution to the problem (Thompson 3). By promising to keep factory and mining jobs in America rather than encouraging new educational opportunities to adapt to a progressive society, President Trump allows the population to keep from advancing or acknowledging the need to develop new skills that will be competitive in a changing economic market. With the development of new technologies, factory jobs will

eventually be eliminated to reduce production costs and those who have no other trade or developed skill will either be unemployed or paid a wage that is inadequate for covering the cost of living. Similarly to Donner's policies in the novel, the neoliberal economic policies in society keep the working class just above water. "A worker in the lower middle class earns about \$2000 per month after taxes and has employer provided health-care. That person would not be able to afford more than rent for an apartment" (Fredirka). It would be wiser to provide new educational opportunities or training to the working class to give them the tools necessary for a successful career that can progress as society changes rather than ignoring the changes taking place. By ignoring the change in economic practice and allowing citizens to remain willfully ignorant of the need to pursue educational opportunities adapt to these changes, President Trump sets up the working class for long-term failure.

Along with President Trump's denial of necessary adaptations in the workforce is his denial of concerns surrounding climate change. President Trump rejects scientific data proving climate change exists by claiming, "'human-caused climate change [was] a hoax' foisted upon us by the Chinese" (Rosner 37). He pledged to support the mining of coal and protect the jobs of coal miners, an industry with destructive effects on the environment as well as the health of its workers. "Alarmingly, he has pledged to support coal usage, withdraw the US commitment to the 2015 Paris climate agreement and reverse the Clean Power Plan, which aims to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants" (Long 495). These jobs could be reallocated to alternative energy industries should the president decide climate change is a concern of society. "A revitalized US nuclear industry could deliver large amounts of safer and cheaper carbon-

free nuclear power — and provide jobs in design, construction and maintenance” if the workers would be willing to pursue training that allows them to adapt to new, more sustainable industries (Long 495).

Similarly to Donner, President Trump’s message discourages us from embracing diversity. The rhetoric used in his campaign only bolsters social inequality that previously existed in our society. “His campaign appealed openly to racial resentment among the white working class, invoking anti-Muslim sentiment, and making audible the racial dog whistles that had, over time, become less clearly audible in American political discourse” (Lieberman et al. 6). By capitalizing on racial resentment, he validates an inaccurate distinction about what it means to be an American, deepening societal divisions and advancing a form of ethnic nationalism “which is zero-sum, aggressive and nostalgic and which draws on race or history to set the nation apart” (The new nationalism”). His rhetoric implies there is an in group and an out group, the in group being the white American majority and the out group being American minorities. An example of ethnic partitioning in the United States is the rise of white supremacy in the American population. Per “the current social outcome data, the fever of white Supremacy has emerged once again in American society like a long-dormant social disease,” and “is being fueled by White fear and anger” (Schwartz 293). This recent rise in the white supremacy movement accompanies an alternative right wing political climate, and it is exhibited through protests and acts of terrorism. Whether or not President Trump directly supports the white supremacist movement or claims any affiliation with it, the rhetoric used in his campaign to capitalize on racial resentments validates its presence in the United States and allows populations of the country to be isolated and ostracized.

Adding to the division in society are the socioeconomic gaps that determine someone's access to resources necessary to thrive in the United States. The United States of America is painted as a land of opportunity in which anyone can succeed or fulfill his or her dreams if he or she works hard enough. The American meritocracy is meant to be an equal opportunity; anyone should be able to move from the lower class to the middle or upper class with the adequate effort level. To break through social and economic barriers, every person needs and deserves access to a quality education. While primary and secondary education is currently available to all students through "No Child Left Behind," a high school diploma is no longer an adequate certification to make a living wage. At the very least, most jobs and career paths now require an undergraduate degree if not a master's degree to be qualified for a given position. Unfortunately, higher education is thousands or tens of thousands of dollars each year, restricting the number of people who have access to this resource, restricting those in the lower socioeconomic classes from succeeding in society.

The infrastructure described by Garrett Hardin as a way to keep the commons in check has not been implemented into our society. We have allowed the neoliberal policies and the recently inaugurated President to perpetuate inequalities that lead to a large scale breakdown of society. The large scale forces trickle down to permeate small-scale communities and individuals. Octavia Butler provides her reader a method of combatting this breakdown by reversing the process and rebuilding the commons from the local level up. To change and improve society's infrastructure and governance, a demand for change has to exist amongst the members of society. By starting from the



local level and building toward national reform, progress towards a restored commons can be made.

To move toward a reformed society and restored commons and to create a mutually coercive infrastructure as described by Hardin, we must first follow the path laid out by Butler to adapt, educate, and unify. A starting point for this reform as described by Butler is to stop hiding behind religion as an excuse to ignore change and to keep from adapting in society. Religion is not something to use an excuse not to address problems. In this way we mimic Lauren's community. By hiding behind traditional dogma and values, ignoring the changes society faces as it develops and grows, we allow ourselves to hide from reality in our own state of denial. Nothing can be solved or improved if we are not willing to grow, change, and adapt.

Additionally, as Butler points out, we need to encourage education and citizenship that prevents us from slipping into a self-centered passivity in the same way the members of Lauren's community allowed themselves to do. One of the dominant issues in the book is a defeatist attitude that prevents many members of society from acting. This attitude is widely visible in our own society today. People are frustrated by politics, so they choose to ignore political elections or what impact many policies have on the country. They adopt a 'keep your head down and focus on your own life' type of attitude that prevents them from taking action to combat the trends with which they became frustrated. Ignoring the problems within the political system and focusing only on the day to day life of oneself prevents positive change as citizens remain passive rather than actively advocating for reform. We need to educate ourselves on modern seeds of destruction

plaguing our society such as division and denial in order to properly combat them. The problem must be acknowledged and understood before it can be solved.

Lastly, we need to unify. I mean this in that we need to embrace diversity as well as acknowledge the gap that has been created between socioeconomic classes in the United States. For an infrastructure to be mutually coercive, the majority of the population needs to subscribe to the infrastructures demands. Therefore, the mutually coercive system should be based on the collective values and perspectives of the people living in the society. As we saw in the novel, ignoring a section of society only ends in its destruction. By meeting the needs of all citizens and providing everyone an opportunity to succeed, we create a prosperous nation that is able to survive the tragedy of the commons.

### **Conclusion**

Octavia Butler provides her American audience an analysis of the root causes of a commons' collapse, as well as some possible solutions to preventing its collapse in order to warn her readers against ignoring current trends in our society which could lead to our tragedy of the commons in her speculative dystopian novel, *The Parable of the Sower*. Through her protagonist, Lauren, Butler gives her readers hope for the future, prompting them to take action and combat the modern tragedy of the commons rather than falling into passivity. As indicated by the title of the novel, society will reap what it sows. To be a healthy society with a sustainable commons we need to invest in healthy members of our society with sustainable policies and solutions. We have the opportunity to start our national reform now by combatting rigidity, denial, and division with adaptability, education, and unity.

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